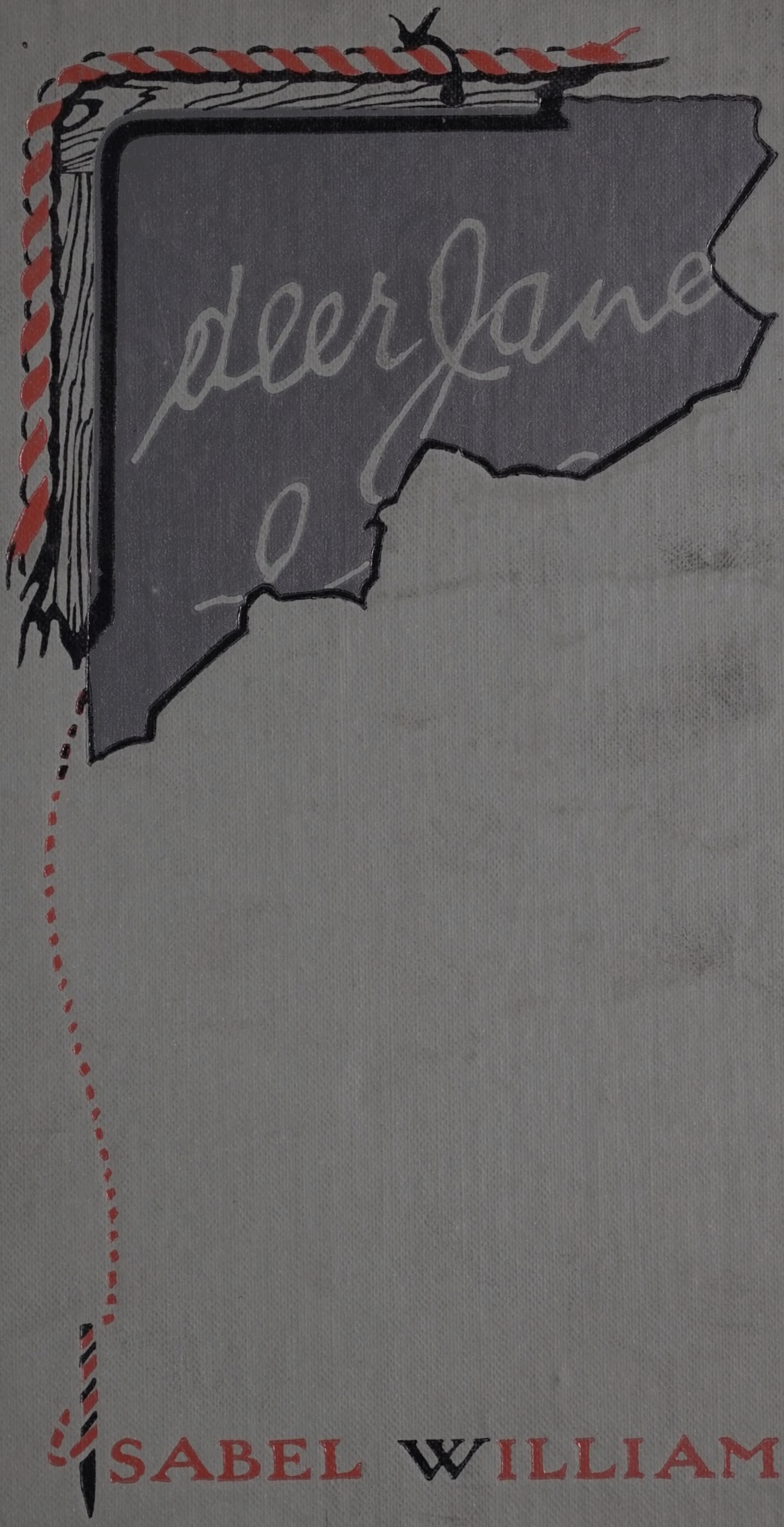

ISABEL WILLIAMS


Jos Sloman

"DEER JANE"

BY

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"DEER JANE."

CHAPTER I.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

JANE PRESTON, opening the door of her small flat and entering quickly, found herself confronted by three pairs of reproachful eyes, brown, blue, and gray respectively. The expression of the three faces was curious to see. Roger's wore a look of deepest concern and anxiety, Dickie's was a funny mixture of worry and boyish impatience, while Elaine's pretty countenance was disfigured by a frown of petulant anger. The expression of the voices as each spoke in turn, exactly matched the faces.

"Why, Jane, what could have happened to keep you so late! We were terribly anxious about you," said Roger.

"Yes, indeed, Sis, we've been in a nice state on your account. Roger's been walking up and down like a caged wild animal and I was just going to put on my hat and go out to telephone to all the hospitals and police stations in town."

"And of course," this from Elaine in a tone of injured dignity. "Of course, you couldn't possibly remember that Roger had promised to take us all to the theater to-night and you'd told him to be sure and come over for supper so's he'd be here in time. Well, Roger's here early enough, Dickie and I are here, and you and the supper walk in just about the time we should be in our seats watching the curtain go up."

Jane's face was drawn with fatigue and very white, but she laid aside the parcels she was carrying and smiled brightly as she turned to the three who were watching her.

"You dear people, I am so very sorry to have kept you waiting. I was busy over there at the office and honestly I had no idea that it was so late. I'll tell you all about it by and by, but don't ask any questions now. Never mind about the theater, Elaine, we can go to-morrow night just as well. You blessed child, your face will be a wrinkled old woman's long before you are my age if you will persist in frowning like that cross little bulldog in the flat upstairs. That's better, baby. You should never do anything but smile, for you are really almost pretty when you smile," and Jane pulled her little sister's ear playfully, patted Dickie

on the shoulder, and threw a friendly smile to the man whose brown eyes had not yet lost their expression of worry.

"But, dearie me, dearie me, let's not stand here all night grinning like monkeys. All of you come and help with the supper so as to hurry it along, for I am simply starving. Elaine, you and Roger may lay the table and attend to affairs in the dining-room while Richard and I cook a perfectly beautiful steak I bought on my way home."

"Oh! I say, Jane," expostulated Roger. "Isn't that putting it a bit strong, you know? Kindly respect my artistic temperament and do not ask me to apply an adjective like beautiful to a piece of raw meat."

"Very well, Roger," Jane laughed back at him as she marshalled her forces to the dining-room and kitchen.

"If you have no more respect than that for my ability to select what I shall persist in calling a beautiful steak, you shall not have one scrap of it to eat. If you behave very prettily, we *may* give you the bone."

"Lucky dog to get even a bone, I suppose," returned Roger.

Preparations for the meal progressed amid a gale of merriment and badinage flung back and forth between the two in the dining-room and the two in the kitchen. It was an established fact that laughter followed in Jane Preston's footsteps. Roger had once said of her:

"I think when Jane is going to her own funeral she will find some way of turning the mourners' tears into laughter or at least, into quiet peace and happiness. I have yet to meet the pall of gloom which Jane's gentle tact and ready sympathy will not dispel."

To-night, she was the life of the party, but there was a something underlying her gayety which made Roger watch her with scarcely hidden anxiety. "Something on her mind," he thought. "Wonder what it is?"

When the steak had been pronounced a most decided success and four well-fed and apparently thoroughly contented people were nibbling at some freshly roasted peanuts which Roger, strange to say, had found in his coat pocket, Jane pushed away her plate and cup and saucer. Deliberately placing her elbows on the space left vacant, she laid one hand over the other and rested her chin on the back of the uppermost hand. Roger knew the gesture of old. In fact, he thought to himself, were there any little tricks and gestures of hers he did not know by heart and understand perfectly.

Jane smiled a queer little smile at each one in turn and drew a long breath as though preparing for a plunge.

"Out with it at once, Jane; you'll feel better when you get it out of your system," counseled Roger.

"Out with what, Roger? What do you mean?" Jane looked at him rather nervously.

"Oh! whatever it is that's been on your mind and bothering you ever since you came in to-night."

Jane flushed ever so slightly.

"Well, folkses," she began, rubbing her chin on the back of her hand and watching curiously for the effect of her words on her listeners. "I have something to tell you all and I do hope you will feel as happy over it as I do."

"She may feel happy, but she don't look it," confided Roger to his teacup.

"And this that I have to tell you is the reason I was so late to-night. I was obliged to remain at the office to finish up a number of small odds and ends before handing the keys over to my successor."

"Your successor!" The exclamation flashed from three throats simultaneously. There was no doubt as to the effect of her words thus far.

"Yes, my successor," went on Jane quietly. "When I left the factory to-night, I left it never to return, at least, in the capacity of employee."

"But I say, Sis, what are you going to do? What are we all going to do if you quit working? And how did it happen, did old Alford fire you? If he did . . ." and Richard's flashing eyes and clenched fists spoke volumes.

"I do not believe Mr. Alford would do that," interposed Roger gently, his grave eyes seeking to read Jane's face.

"I do not see where or how he could find a substitute for our Jane. Go on, Jane, tell us about it."

"You are right in one surmise, Roger," and Jane laughed, a trifle unsteadily it must be admitted, "and wrong in the other. I left a very excellent substitute to take my place when I closed the office door to-night. It is a most estimable young man with carroty hair and a squint. He has brains though, so with a little careful training I think he may be able to do as well as yours truly. However, Mr. Alford did not 'fire' me, as Dickie expresses it. He has offered me another and a better position."

"Oh! goodie, goodie!" this from the hitherto silent but watchful small sister. "That'll mean more money and a new dress for me, won't it, Janey dear?"

"Yes, baby, it will mean ever and

ever so much more money and new clothes and good times for us all."

"Go on, Jane," Roger's voice was stern now, and ominously quiet. What is the new position he has offered you?"

"He has asked me to be his wife, Roger," replied Jane simply; "and I have promised to become Mrs. Alford one month from to-day."

Dead silence greeted Jane's statement. Roger's face slowly paled and his mouth set in a hard, straight line, Richard and Elaine gasped in open-mouthed amazement.

Jane glanced quickly from one to another.

"Well, what ails you all; aren't you pleased with my news?"

"Pleased!" and Richard sprang to his feet and banged his chair in under the table. "Look here, Sis, if this is a joke, I think it has gone quite far

enough. John Alford is nearly as old as Jimmy Jones's grandfather. You mustn't think of marrying him, not for a moment."

"But, Dickie boy, think what it will mean to all of us. We can have everything we want without working for it any more. Mr. Alford is not very young, but he is good and kind. He has done everything for us, as you know, and I am sure we are all going to be very, very happy. Roger, will not you, my best friend and old playmate, help me show Richard how grateful we should be to Mr. Alford, who might choose among the loveliest ladies in the land, for wishing to honor poor little me by making me Mrs. Alford? Roger, please," and Jane reached an imploring hand across the table to the man who had been her playmate in childhood, her best friend always.

Roger rose to his feet, his face livid. Jane rose, too, and faced him calmly dignified, if thoroughly surprised and hurt.

"Jane," and the voice was so hard and bitter she could not believe it was really Roger who was speaking.

"Jane, there is only one thing I can say and it is this. All my life, I have honored you, idealized you, regarded you as the one perfect woman on God's earth. Now, I see you are like all the rest, worse than many of them, in fact. You would sell yourself to that heartless old cynic of an Alford (oh! don't protest, I know the reputation he enjoys) and all for the sake of his money. What will not money do, when it can buy even Jane Preston! Jane Preston, Jane, the one and only perfect creature in the wide, wide world. What a joke, what a joke, and the joke is on me! Good-

bye, Jane Preston. As Mrs. John Alford, may you have all the happiness you so richly deserve." In a towering passion, Roger flung out of the room and a moment later they heard the house door close with a resounding bang.

For a space, Jane stood silent and immovable, her face pale as death, her hand pressed to her side as though to still some pain there. Then Elaine's voice broke in, replete with childish anger.

"Now just see what you have done, you and your old Mr. Alford between you. You've broken Roger's heart, so you have. Everybody knew he was just stuck on you though *you* never seemed to notice it. Why, all the people I know on this street speak of him as my sister's beau and ask me when you are going to get hitched. *I* think he's the handsomest, nicest, best

man ever lived and I'm going to ask him to wait till I grow up. I'll marry him myself one of these days, just see if I don't."

Jane's gentle calm never wavered and she looked sadly into the mutinous gray eyes as she said quietly:

"Little sister, those remarks of the neighbors which you say were repeated in your hearing, prove to me most conclusively that it is time I took you away from such vulgar associations. Come, children, come into my sitting-room, for I must have a very serious talk with both my bad little babies. There now, we'll all sit here in the darkness just as we have sat so many, many times since you two and big sister were left alone in the world to be all in all to one another. Dickie boy, answer me one question. Since mother and father went away to Heaven, has not sister

done all she could to be mother, father, and big sister, all in one, to you two little people?"

"You bet you have, Sis, and that's why we hate to have you marry an old man like Mr. Alford, when you could have had our dear, good Roger for the asking."

"Well, Dickie, I never intended asking Roger to marry me, so please leave him out of it entirely. You can never know all Mr. Alford did for father and mother when I was a small girl and you two were only little babies. You can never know all he did for me when father and mother died. And now, he wishes to take care of us all and will be very, very good to us."

"But we don't need him to take care of us. You've done that for six years now and I'll soon be grown up and then I'll take care of you. I'm

fourteen, you know, and I help a little even now, don't I, Sis?"

"You help a great deal, dear, and I am sure in a few years you could support us all very nicely. But, Dickie, I'm afraid Sister could not hold out for those few years. I am not overstrong, dearie, and am very, very tired. If anything happened to Sister, where would her boy and girl be then?"

"You're not really sick, are you, Sis?" and the boy's voice was anxious.

"No, no, dear, not really sick, but very tired. Besides, even if I could hold out until you are ready to assume the burden, I do not want either of my children to settle into a mere drudge for life. I want you both to be something, to do something really worth while. You, Dickie, must go to college, then, choose whatever career you seem best fitted for. Mr. Alford will see you through. Elaine

shall go to some good boarding school and I think her specialty will be music. How would you like to have a piano of your very own, baby?"

"A really, truly, shiney all over piano, not a cracked, dirty, all out of tune one like the old thing that the people downstairs let me practise on now?"

"Yes, dear, a really, truly piano, the best money can buy."

"And, Janey dear, would we ride in his big red automobile, and have silk dresses, and chicken every day for dinner?"

"We certainly would, dear, and above all, we would have the kindest, best and most generous of men to take care of us always. You cannot know him as I do, but when you do know him, you will love and honor him—as I do," she added after a barely perceptible pause.

Two hours later, when Jane had tucked her charges safely away for the night, she sat in the old rocker in her shabby sitting-room which was lighted only by the reflection of an electric light on the street outside. She gazed into the darkness, thinking of Roger whom she regarded as her best and truest friend. How could he hurt her so very, very cruelly? At the thought, hot tears sprang to her eyes and dropped unheeded on her folded hands. A little white figure stole noiselessly in and stood beside her.

"I say, Sis."

"Yes, Dickie."

"Do you really and truly want to do this?"

"I really and truly want it, Dickie. I want it more than I ever wanted anything in my whole life."

"What are you crying for, then?"

"Am I crying, dear? I did not know it."

A short silence, then:

"Dickie boy."

"What is it, Sis?"

"Can you remember when you were just a wee little laddie and used to climb up on my lap and ask me to rock you to sleep? Don't you suppose, Dickie, we could just pretend you were my little, little baby again and let me hold you as I used to?"

"I'm afraid I'm too big, Sis," rather doubtfully, "and that a good deal of me would be spilling off onto the floor. But I tell you what! I'll put my arm around you, so. You lean your head on my shoulder and I'll hold you. That'll be sort of turn about, won't it? But why you should cry just because we're all going to do the 'live happy ever after' stunt they talk about in the fairy tales, passes

me. I guess us men don't know much about girls any way."

"Dickie, you scamp, what are you talking about? Us men, indeed! You may be too big for me to rock you to sleep, but you're not too big to be spanked. If you stand there another second catching cold as fast as you can, I'll forget big you are and give you a genuine, old-fashioned spanking. Off to bed this minute, sir."

A sudden flash of white across the room and Dickie had disappeared bedwards.

Presently in a very sleepy voice: "I say, Sis."

"Yes, Dickie."

"Will he give me a red automobile, all my own, do you think?"

"He probably will if you are a very good boy."

Prolonged silence, and then:

"Si-is."

"Yes, dear."

"And will he . . . send me to . . . college . . . to learn . . . to . . . be . . ."

But what Dickie was going to learn to be, Jane did not find out till some time later. Master Richard was safe in the land of dreams watching a long line of stern college professors march past him with books under their arms, flaming automobile headlights instead of eyes, and rubber-tired wheels where their ears ought to be.

CHAPTER II.

THE BROKEN SLATE.

ROGER stood with his back to the room and beat a restless tattoo upon the window pane. Jane sewed quietly, sitting in her chair by the table and listening to alternate exclamations of annoyance and squeals of delight from the two children busily engaged in a game of Parchesi in the kitchen.

"Well," said the man at the window curtly, not turning around and not ceasing for even a second that quick, nervous tapping. "Why did you send for me, Jane? I should think you would never care to see me again after . . . after last night."

Jane's face was very tired and she looked up sadly at the broad back

turned so resolutely towards her, but her voice was steady and as sweet and kind as usual.

"I sent for you, Roger, because we have always been such good, good friends that it would nearly break my heart to feel we had parted in anger. Tell me, can you ever remember a time when we were not friends, you and I?"

No answer from the window save that ceaseless tattoo. Jane's gentle voice continued

"Why, even when we were little children, Roger, and I scarcely able to toddle along beside you, do you remember how you used to come every day and take me for a walk and show me the beautiful things in the store windows? Mother used to say she would trust me anywhere with Roger, he was so steady and reliable though only two years older than I."

Still no answer from the window.

"Then the day you first went to school and I cried nearly all day because I wanted to go with you and they said I was too young. And then, Roger, the day I first went to school. Do you remember how proudly you took me by the hand and introduced me to the teacher as your "little sister"? You always called me Sis in those days just as Dickie does now. I was so proud of my big brother who looked after me and petted and shielded me and fought my battles for me. You used to be very patient with me then and I must have tried you sorely at times. I had a nasty little temper even if you won't admit it now. I often pulled your hair and tried to scratch you and bite you but you were always so good, so good to me. And once, surely you remember that awful day, on the way home from school I snatched your brand new slate and smashed it on the

sidewalk because you were writing a note on it and I thought the note was to the little black-eyed girl across the street."

"It wasn't to the girl across the street."

"I know it wasn't, Roger. I discovered later for whom the note was really intended. But you did 'get mad at me' (as we used to put it) that day and left me to walk the rest of the way home alone. I wouldn't let you see that I cared and marched along with my nose in the air, but do you know what I did when you turned the corner and could not see? I stole back and picked up the broken pieces, then ran all the way home and cried and cried and cried because I could not put them together again and make the slate as good as new. But you could not remain angry long and came in that evening with a stick

of striped sugar candy as a peace offering. We made up again and ate the candy bite and bite in turn. Think of those days, Roger, shake hands and let's be friends again just as we've always been."

"I do think of those days, Jane. I think of all you were to me then and of all you have been to me ever since, and I cannot, simply cannot stand by and see you marry that miserable old man. Tell me," and the man at the window wheeled suddenly and faced her. "Tell me why you are doing it? I have been thinking it over all night and I cannot believe you to be what I thought in the first shock of surprise and anger. If he were a younger man or a different sort of man, it would not be quite so hard to bear, though hard enough, God knows."

"Why do you say a different kind of a man, Roger? You have never

met Mr. Alford, so how can you judge what kind of man he is?"

"I know what people say of him; a man who stands alone in the world with not even one friend to call his own. A man who is absolutely worldly, hard and cynical, who has amassed great wealth, honestly to be sure, but has spent not one red cent on any creature but himself."

"There you are very wrong, Roger, because he has spent a great many, not cents, but dollars, upon me and mine."

"Upon you and yours? What do you mean?"

"Well, if you will please sit down and listen patiently I would like very much to tell you a story. There, that's better. You look much more comfy now. We'll begin as they do in the fairy tales, only this is an absolutely true story I am going to tell you.

"Once upon a time, and sometimes it seems ever and ever so long ago, and sometimes it might be only yesterday, there lived a little girl who was very much the same as a number of other little girls living at the same time. She had a dear kind father and mother, younger brothers and sisters and one very good friend, a boy a trifle older than she. Well, everything went along smoothly and beautifully until this little girl was about twelve years old. The boy friend was visiting relatives in the far West that winter so he knew nothing of what happened in his absence. You know the old saying about troubles never coming singly. It was certainly exemplified in the case of this little girl. The father had never been a very strong man and that winter he had a severe illness from which he was slow to recover.

Three of the children died, leaving only the girl of twelve, a boy of two and a small baby of a few weeks old. I can tell you, Roger, the mother was hard pressed that winter to keep a roof over their heads and bread in their mouths. When the father finally recovered, the position he had filled for fifteen years had been given to a younger and stronger man. He tried everywhere for work, but everywhere, his poor health told against him and at last they found themselves on the verge of starvation.

"Now, this little girl had been thinking pretty hard for some time, and one day, instead of going to school where her mother had insisted upon keeping her despite all entreaties to be allowed to come home and help in the sewing by which the family was supported, she started off on her own account to look for work.

There was a large factory not far from where she lived and she knew of girls who worked there and who were not much older than she. As I said, she was a queer little person in some ways, and, although frightened to death, she boldly marched into the office of the factory and demanded an interview with the owner himself. There were two or three office boys running errands, answering bells and inquiring into the business of all who entered. She tried each one in turn, only to be laughed at and not very politely refused. Still she persisted until one of the boys complained to a man clerk in the inner office. He came out and was peremptorily ordering her off the premises, when a very tall man with iron-gray hair, stern face and piercing gray eyes, appeared in a doorway behind them and stood for a second listening to the alterca-

tion. The girl's temper was up by that time, and she had quite a bad little temper too, and she stamped her foot and refused positively to stir from the place till she had seen the owner himself. The tall gray man stepped forward, with a look before which at any other time the girl would have fled immediately. Now, she was too thoroughly angry to notice.

"'You won't leave until you've seen the owner of this place himself, won't you?' said the gray man.

"'No, I won't,' snapped the girl.

"'And what, may I ask, do you wish to say to the owner of this factory?' demanded the man with another glare down on the small girl before him.

"'I'll say what I have to say to the owner when I see him, not to you, thank you,' retorted the girl, glaring

back into the stern face. Then, seeing the horrified amazement of those who had watched the scene, the girl suddenly guessed the truth. Stepping quickly up to the tall man she held out her hand and, smiling very sweetly, said as politely as she knew how:

"'Oh! sir, I'm very sorry I spoke like that. You see, I didn't know. I suppose you must own this place yourself.'

"'Yes, young lady, I am the owner of this factory and now what can I do for you?'

"'Well, then,' answered the girl, slipping her hand into one of his, 'just take me to your private office and I'll tell you all about it.'"

For a second, the gray man stared in blank astonishment. He wore a heavy fur coat and his automobile was at the door. An expression of

grim amusement crossed his face as he drew out his watch and looked at it.

"'I'm ten minutes late for that Directors' Meeting now,' he muttered. Then, throwing open the door behind them, he passed through to his private office taking the girl with him.

"In spite of the fact that a most important meeting was waiting for him, and a messenger had already been sent to request his immediate presence, that man, stern, cold, cynical as the world called him, listened kindly and patiently to the story of that little girl. He has told her since it was the spirit and temper of her that won him. As a rule, people feared, hated or fawned upon him; none before had dared defy him to his face. When she had finished, he said very gently:

"'How old are you, my dear?'

"'Just twelve.'

"'And you want to come here to work?'

"'Yes, sir, please; indeed I do.'

"'You're quite sure there is nothing else you want of me but that?' and he looked searchingly at her.

"'Quite, quite sure. If you give me work here I can help mother till father finds a position. Even if he does not, mother and I together can take care of the family.'

"For a few seconds the man studied the child's face and his own grew sad rather than stern. Rising with a sigh, he said under his breath:

"'If I had only had someone like her, what a different man I might have been!'

"'Then, after asking where she lived and writing down the address she gave him, he once more took her

by the hand, ushered her through the outer office and, to her great astonishment as well as that of the clerks and office boys who were peeping, he lifted her into his automobile and wrapped the fur rugs carefully around her. To the amazed chauffeur he handed the slip of paper upon which he had written her address, with the command to get there as quickly as possible. He then leaned back in the seat beside her and said to himself with a chuckle:

"'I'd give a cool million to have those directors lined up here along the curb just to see the expression on their faces. Well, I guess old Alford can snap his fingers at them and keep meetings waiting all day if he should happen to prefer a motor ride with a most unusual little girl.'

"Well, Roger, I need not tell you the little girl was myself and the tall

gray man was Mr. Alford. He took me home that day, talked with father and mother, gave father a position in the factory where he would have only light, easy work to do and paid him three times as much as he really earned. In that way, I could continue at school and help mother in the house besides.

"Then, when father and mother went to Heaven, both inside of three months the year I was eighteen, Mr. Alford again proved himself our good angel. He paid all expenses of both funerals, telling me it was merely a loan and I must repay it some day. He well knew I never could, but said it to save my feelings I suppose. He also took me into his office and trained me to be his chief assistant. I wish you could know how kind he was to me then, never finding fault and patient always, no matter how

many mistakes I made. I made plenty of them at first, too. You were away that time, also, Roger. In New York, you remember, studying with that wonderful French artist, I never can recall his name. I did not want to worry my kind friend, who I knew had plenty of worries of his own, so I wrote merely the news of father's and mother's passing away and that I was working in a very congenial and easy position.

"Since your return, your friendship has meant much to me. It has been pleasant to have you come and tell me of your hopes and plans and ambitions. You will be a great man in the end, of that I am certain. The way just now is all up-hill, but some day you will reach the top and all the world will be looking up to you. On that day, I shall be proud to say, 'that man was once my best friend.' I

shall be prouder still if I can say, 'and he is still my best friend.'

"As for Mr. Alford, if you really knew him, you would honor and love him as I do."

Roger had sat very still during Jane's recital and when she finished he rose to his feet snd stood before her.

"Jane," he said penitently, "will you please to try to forgive me for what I said to you last night? I can never forgive myself."

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered kindly, "I knew you did not mean it for you did not understand."

"And, also, Jane, best, truest and noblest of women, I hope you will be happy always, always. If you are, I shall try to be content. And now, Jane, good-bye."

Jane rose and leaned one hand lightly on the table beside her.

"Good-bye, Roger?"

"Yes, good-bye, and God bless you."

He held out his hand to her and she laid hers in it. The next second, he was at the door, his fingers on the knob.

"One moment, Roger please," Jane called quickly.

She had turned away and was examining some ornament upon the mantel. The man turned but Jane did not. With her face away from him, she went on speaking.

"There is something of yours on the table, Roger. I was going to burn it last night but I thought, just possibly you might like it to keep. It is really yours, you know. Lift that handkerchief and you will find it."

The man raised the handkerchief and lifted the small object it had concealed; the broken corner of a child's slate with a stub of slate pencil

attached to it by a bit of knotted and very much soiled string. On the slate, were written two words in a sprawling, childish hand. The writing had been his own; the words were, "deer Jane."

Dead silence filled the little room and Jane did not move from her position by the mantel until long after she had heard a man's unsteady footsteps making for the door, and heard the closing of the door from the other side.

One month later, two persons leaned on the rail of an Atlantic liner and watched the lights on shore receding slowly, slowly, dying and disappearing one by one. The figures were those of a woman and a boy. The boy leaned his head against her shoulder and placed his arm gently about her. The woman's cheek rested against his rough traveling cap and she asked gently:

"What's the trouble, Dickie boy? Tell Sis all about it."

"Nothing, Sis, nothing. Only——"

"Only what, dearie?"

"Nothing, just nothing, I guess."

A very tall man who had been walking up and down with a little girl clinging to his arm and chattering like a magpie, heard the questions and answers. Stopping beside the two at the rail, he laid his hand on the lad's shoulder and said kindly:

"Richard, my man, I fear you have never really liked me and never really trusted me. I promise you solemnly neither you nor your sister shall ever regret this day. My one wish, my one purpose in life now is to make my wife the happiest woman in the world. Will you not try to like me a little, Richard, and trust me absolutely?"

In the semi-darkness, the man and boy looked into each other's eyes, then

their right hands met in a hearty clasp. Jane smiled to herself then sighed softly as the very last light on shore disappeared from her view.

At that same moment, in his sparsely furnished, half heated room, a hitherto unknown and struggling artist sat with the evening newspaper crushed in one hand, a bit of broken slate in the other, while unheeded at his feet lay the first large commission that had come to him. That commission meant fame and fortune for him, but he gave it not a single thought. He looked only at the bit of slate and whispered low :

" Good-bye, ' deer Jane,' good-bye."

CHAPTER III.

OVER THE TEA-TABLE.

JOHN ALFORD paused in his walk up and down the veranda of his home and smiled amusedly at a party of three people who broke from the shelter of the shrubbery and raced swiftly across the snow-covered lawn. Well in advance, her skirts held high with both hands, her eyes sparkling and cheeks glowing, sped Jane. She flew up the steps, dashed behind her tall husband and, grasping his arms to steady herself, peeped around at her pursuers.

"Save me, John, save me," she panted, laughing and breathless. "Those two vandals swore they would roll me in a snow-drift if I

beat them from the station to the house, and you see I did."

The other two had followed swiftly on Jane's heels and John Alford grasped each assailant with one hand and glared at them in pretended anger.

"What do you mean, sir, and you, Miss," he demanded sternly, the while his eyes twinkled and the corners of his mouth twitched in his effort to keep from smiling. "I am shocked, I am scandalized by such behavior. If you have any excuses to offer, do so at once before I call my men and dogs and have you forcibly ejected."

"Oh! I say, Nunkey, you're too mean for anything. She didn't play fair. She cheated, choosing the very shortest way and betting we couldn't get here as soon as she. We weren't to run even one step but walk as fast as we could, and the very first second

we spied her through the trees, she was running like a quarter-miler. I say she deserves a good rolling in that big snow-bank on the other side of the driveway, and I'm sure Richard agrees with me." This from the very pretty, very excited girl of seventeen whom his left hand was holding firmly. His right grasped the collar of Richard's coat and he shook that youth playfully as he turned to him.

"And what defense have you to make in this matter, Sir?"

"None at all, John, absolutely none, except to confess that, at the moment we spied Sis running, Elaine and I were running too as fast as we could go. I move that the affair be dropped and the court adjourned to the house and the tea-table."

"Oh! you squealer, you squealer," cried Elaine. "I'll get even with you for this, just see if I don't."

Then the four burst into irrepressible laughter like a crowd of happy children. John Alford released the culprits and Jane led the way indoors.

"Come right up to my own sitting-room, good people, do," she urged. "It is much more cosy than the den or the library. You can just throw aside your wraps, Elaine, and I'll have a nice hot cup of tea and toasted muffins, *and* marmalade, Dickie, in a very few moments. You blessed, blessed children, it is so good to have you home again, and how well you are both looking, are they not, John?"

John Alford sank into his own special easy-chair beside the open fire and made great pretense of polishing his glasses before inspecting the newcomers.

"Well," he remarked at last judicially, "I really think Richard could hardly be improved upon. Believe

me, lad, I'm more than glad to have you home again," and he held out his hand to his young brother-in-law and gave him a cordial grasp of good-fellowship. Between these two, a friendship had sprung up which was more like the strong affection between an honored and revered father and his only son, than simply the friendship of man to man. Jane's eyes danced happily, as she noticed the look which passed between the two.

"And Elaine, John, what do you think of Elaine?"

"Elaine? Well, let me see. She has certainly grown taller and she looks well enough. But, for heaven's sake, my dear, what is that fearful arrangement of buns and rolls and doughnuts on your head? It makes me think of a bakeshop window that had somehow made his escape and gone out for a walk."

With a shriek, the girl flew across the room, took him by the shoulders and vainly tried to shake him. His massive form moved never an inch in the grasp of her small hands.

"You hateful old wretch of a Nunkey," she exclaimed. "That is the very latest thing in hairdressing. I learned it last week when I was visiting the Fosters in New York. You know they are too terribly swell for anything and always have the very latest things. Both Adelaide and Miriam wear their hair just like this. In fact, all the really swell girls do now."

"Dear me, how very monotonous that must be. But, my dear child, make yourself into as many bakeshops as you please if you are any happier for it."

"Well, he was a blessed old Nunkey and one of these days we'll do his hair

up into nice little curls and puffs and things. It would look just beautiful it's so thick and soft and silvery."

"By the way, Elaine," broke in Richard, "I have often meant to ask you where on earth you got that awful title of Nunkey and why, in the name of all the philosophers, do you apply it to John? Every time I hear it, I look around expecting to see you addressing some silly little poodle with pink eyes and shaggy hair or a small angora kitten with a blue ribbon around its neck."

"You horrid, nasty Richard to say such things. I think it is a perfectly sweet name and I feel very proud to think I invented it all myself. Look here, Nunkey, which would you rather be, a shaggy little poodle with pink eyes or a dear cunning angora kitten with a blue ribbon around your neck? I rather fancy the blue ribbon, it would

become you so. Oh! you needn't pretend you're as cross as a bear; you couldn't frighten me no matter how hard you tried. I will confess, though, I was horribly afraid of you once. I thought you were a detestable old curmudgeon and told Jane so the day she broke the news to us that she was going to marry you. My, didn't we pitch into her! But I found out since that she was right and now you're just my dear, ducky darling of a Nunkey, and I will pull his hair if I want to and I will tweak his nose if I want to and he may pretend to be as cross as a bear but he just has to give it up and smile all over his blessed old face even if he does think me a perfectly silly little donkey. Just look at him now, Jane. Isn't he sweet when he smiles like that?"

"You very absurd child," came across the room in Jane's calm voice.

"I do wish you would stop plaguing that poor long-suffering husband of mine and come help me pour the tea, or better still, you and Richard draw the table over beside the fire and we'll drink our tea and eat our muffins and each of you in turn will tell all that has happened since the summer vacation ended and you returned to school."

The table was moved according to instructions and Jane commenced pouring the tea.

"Well, Richard," remarked John Alford with a sly glance at Elaine; "you'd better tell us your story first, because once Elaine begins to talk not one of us will have any chance to even get a word in edgeways. When the sun rises to-morrow morning, it will probably find her still holding forth to three absolutely unconscious listeners who have fallen into a sleep of complete exhaustion."

Elaine's only answer was to pop two lumps of sugar into his cup when Jane was not looking. She knew he hated tea with sugar in it and she knew, too, he would drink it every drop believing Jane had fixed it for him and not wishing to hurt her by calling attention to the mistake.

"Yes, Dickie dear, do tell us everything you've been doing, all the prizes you've won and the good times you've had, and the pranks you've played. I'm just dying to know all about it," and Elaine smiled sweetly at Richard as she handed her brother-in-law his tea, then settled herself in a low chair nearby where she could watch him drink it and gloat over every swallow.

"Well, really," began Richard, "there is hardly anything to tell. You know how it is yourself, John, when a man is working for honors. There's little time for fun or pranks

or anything but a steady grind, grind, grind all the time."

"Yes, Dick, I know. But how about the Crawford scholarship that you had set your heart upon winning? How is your standing so far in that?"

"Oh!" indifferently, "I have withdrawn from that contest."

"Withdrawn! Oh! Richard, it is not like you to give up so easily." Jane's tone was grieved and surprised. Richard reddened slightly under the implied rebuke but he smiled kindly at her as he answered:

"You won't mind, Sis, when you hear my reason; but I do not know just what John will say to a little piece of news I have to tell you all. When I leave college next spring, I shall not go to law school as we had planned that I should do. I have been thinking it over for nearly two years now and have arrived at a final

decision which I feel sure is the right one; but I'm afraid you will not like it, John."

"You mean you have decided not to take up law as I had hoped you would, but are going to do something else?"

"Yes, John, exactly."

"Well, I admit it will be something of a disappointment to me, but I can trust you to do the right, the manly, the honorable thing always. If your sister is pleased and you think you are right, go ahead and be anything you like. I will help you all I can even should your ambition soar to the height of wishing to become scullery-maid or groom of the back-stairs."

"My tastes do not incline in precisely those directions," laughed Richard. "The only reason I feared you might not approve my choice is because, not being of our Faith, you

might not look upon these things as we do."

"Oh, Richard! You don't mean ——" began Jane breathlessly, her face radiant and expectant.

"Yes, Sis, I do mean. I wish very much to enter the Seminary next fall and try to fit myself for the grandest profession it is within any man's power to choose, the profession of saving souls."

John Alford glanced at his wife's face and remarked quietly:

"Richard, as you say, I am not of your Faith and have lived pretty nearly the life of an absolute pagan in some ways. I have given no thought to religion of any kind, at least, until a few years ago, I have not. I own I had high ambitions for you, Dickie lad, for you have been as a son to me. I have often sat here and planned your future success

which I was to help you to win and of which I would be so proud. But that look on your sister's face is quite enough for me. Go ahead, dear boy, become a good and worthy priest since you feel you are drawn to that life, and call on me for anything that may be necessary."

Tears trembled on Jane's lashes, tears of thanksgiving and happiness and Richard's voice shook as he tried to express his gratitude. Elaine sprang to her feet and caught at the tea-cup John was raising to his lips for the first time, having been too interested in Richard's talk to realize that tea was made to drink, not merely to hold in one's hand in a very fragile china cup. Utterly indifferent to the fact that she spilled half the tea over the man's coat and also sent the saucer flying out of his hand onto the floor where it lay in fragments, Elaine

calmly deposited the cup she held upon the table and proceeded to pour out a fresh one.

"There you are, Nunkey dear. That other tea was just stone cold and I'm sure you'd much rather have a nice hot cup even if Jane did pour the other, and only poor little me fixed this. No, Nunkey, there's no sugar in it. I always remember you can't abide tea with sugar in it.

"And now, you blessed people, may I begin and tell you of all my doings? Mine'll just knock Richard's into a cocked hat."

"Elaine dear," Jane's voice was a comic mixture of amusement and despair; "will you never outgrow that dreadful habit of using slang? What must the ladies of the Sacré Coeur think of you."

"They think I'm a regular duck, but they do shy at my slang some-

times. If you only knew the hours I've spent in penance because I simply cannot get over my slang habit! The year I was in Paris I was all right, because we talked nothing but French. I'm a perfectly proper, prisms and prunes sort of fine lady in French, I do assure you. One day, I spent hours and hours trying to find some French slang in the dictionary, but the very best I could do was a few swear words, not real bad ones you know, just ones that would be about the same as our 'oh fudge!' or 'rats!' or things like that. I used to say them to myself occasionally and once I blurted one out in the middle of public examinations because something happened to make me terribly excited. Gee! I wish you could have seen the dear nuns' faces. Yours truly was in her room 'in solitary' on a diet of bread and water for a week.

French people haven't any sense of humor, really. I think slang must be my native tongue. I do honestly try to be careful, but words will slip out now and then."

"I suppose we will have to overlook the slang, child, so just go ahead and tell us what you've been doing and how many hearts you broke while in New York on that wonderful visit you wrote us about. Above all, break to me as gently as possible the number of millinery and soda and candy bills that will come pouring in on me the first of next month," and John Alford kindly patted the hand reaching for his empty cup.

"Speaking of broken hearts reminds me!" exclaimed Elaine. "I've got so much to tell you it'll take a week at least, but the most important of all is something that happened at a dinner

the Fosters gave for me. The broken hearts reminded me of it.

"Well, as I said, the Fosters gave a big dinner in honor of poor little me. Of course I wanted to look nice so I put on my very bestest white frock, you know the one, Janey, all lovely embroidery and real lace. It is just a simple little thing, but I knew all the women's eyes would pop right out of their heads when they saw that lace. Then I got out that splendiferous dull gold necklace and bracelet you sent me for my birthday, Nunkey dear, and I wouldn't wear any other ornament. By the way, I wish you could have seen the sensation that birthday present caused at the convent. Mother Superior herself locked them away in the safe and poor Sister Martha (one of the lay-sisters, you know, who work in the kitchen), used to stand St. Anthony on top of

the safe every night for fear some one might come in and steal the wonderful necklace.

"When I was all dressed for the dinner you may be sure I felt mighty grand and went sailing down the broad staircase at the very last minute on purpose. At least, I started to sail and got to within a few steps of the bottom all right, when my foot caught in something and I plunged headlong into the arms of a man who had just come up the lower flight of stairs. I looked up quickly to beg his pardon and you'd never guess in a hundred years who the man was. None other than Roger, our own old Roger, ever so much thinner, very grave and quiet and those lovely dark curls of his all speckled with white at the temples. But he's the same dear old Roger that he used to be and he knew me at once, though he said

I'd changed a whole heap in five years."

"And who, may I ask, is Roger?" interrupted John Alford curiously.

"Do you mean to say you never heard about Roger?"

"No, baby, never, and he seems to be quite an important personage, at least in your estimation."

Jane answered him in her usual quiet voice. "Roger was once my very best friend, John. We played together as children and he used to be with us a great deal before I was married."

"But why has he not called on us since, my dear? Surely you must have known any friend of yours would be most welcome."

"Why, you silly old Nunkey, he was sweet on Jane and it just broke his heart when she refused him and married you."

"Don't be absurd, Elaine," Jane

said quickly. "I never refused Roger because he never asked me to marry him. You know he was just a friend to all of us."

"Friend be hanged, Janey dear. Roger was just crazy over you and you know it. Oh! you don't need to look like that, Nunkey. Jane never cared a snap of her fingers for him. That was the way with Jane; people would simply adore her and she'd never see it. She'd walk along with her nose in the air and her head in the clouds, trampling unmercifully upon a string of broken hearts and never even knowing what she was stepping on."

"Elaine," cried Jane half vexedly, "if you do not stop talking such absolute nonsense, I shall send you to bed at once and keep you there for a week with nothing to eat but dry bread and water."

"Now, Janey, don't take a leaf out of the book of those dear nuns in Paris. Besides, Nunkey won't let me be punished for just telling the truth, will you, Nunkey?

"But where was I when my very rude sister interrupted me?"

"If I remember rightly," said John Alford, "we left you in the arms of some dear, darling Roger whose heart my wife is supposed to have broken."

"And she did break it, too, but Roger is not the man to pick up the broken pieces and pet them and cry over them and spend the rest of his life moaning and moping and trying to look sad and interesting. He's the sort who'll try to stick the pieces together, turn a brave face to the world and go on and make something of himself. He's done it, too, become famous I mean, and he's nearly got his heart stuck together again. There's still

just a little rent in it as I could see when he asked for 'Mrs. Alford' if you please, but I'm going to mend that for him. You know, Janey, I said once I'd marry him myself one of these days. I've about made my mind up to do it unless I meet someone I like better when I go around and see more people."

"That is very kind and charitable of you, I'm sure," remarked John. "But is the gentleman aware of your intention?"

"Of course not, Nunkey; but he'll be delighted, I am sure, when I tell him about it. I do wish you people wouldn't keep putting me out like this, though. Here I've been standing at the foot of the stairs all this time with Roger when we ought to have reached the fish course at least.

"Well, as I was saying, Roger was so glad to see me he just caught both my hands and pumped up and down

like a steam engine. Of course, we were right in sight of the guests in the drawing-room waiting for dinner to be announced, and you bet they were all rubbering good and plenty too. That made my spirit of mischief wake up for fair, and I thought I'd give those old tabbies something to stare at through their eyeglasses with long pearl sticks to hold them up by. They make me sick, anyway, both the tabbies and the lorgnettes. I gave a funny little squeal and cried out loud so's they'd all hear me.

"'Why, Roger, you blessed old boy, whatever have you been doing to your hair? I do believe it hasn't had a decent combing since the last time I did it for you.'

"You remember, Janey, when I'd want to tease Roger specially hard I'd make him let me comb his hair for him.

"'Got a comb in your pocket, sir?' I demanded sternly.

"Of course he hadn't, so I ordered him to remain where he was and not move hand or foot till I returned. He'd caught sight of the tabbies by this time and was on to my little game. Roger was always a good hand at pranks of any kind. I flew upstairs, into the first room I came to and snatched a comb from the dresser. Downstairs again, taking good care to trip on purpose this time and jump straight into Roger's arms.

"'I hope you are not hurt,' he said very gravely.

"'No,' says I, 'I'm not; but I'd have been killed if it had not been for you. Thank you for saving my life.

"'And now, sir, down on your knees and I'll fix your hair for you just as I used to do.'

"Down on his knees he went very

promptly and you should have seen the horror and amazement on the faces of the tabbies. It seems Roger is terribly grand, sought out by the very swellest people, who feel like patting themselves on the back if he will condescend to bow to them on the street. Adelaide says the women adore him and he is frigidly polite to those he happens to meet, will smile over their heads and tell them what lovely weather we are having, look unutterably bored and then get away from them as soon as he can. Our Roger, it seems, is quite the rage and fails to appreciate the fact. I asked if he posed as a woman-hater and he said, he wouldn't waste time enough on them to hate them. You can imagine the sensation it caused when he popped down on his knees at my behest and not only submitted to having his hair combed in public but

actually seemed to like it. I gave his topknot a final dab and then stood back to see the effect of my work. I tossed the comb to an astonished footman who stood near, told Roger to get up immediately or he'd get a cramp in his knees, then sailed into the drawing-room on the arm of the lion of the evening. He took me in to dinner, too, he fixed the deal with Mrs. Foster, and talked with me as much as he possibly could all the rest of the evening. Gee! but didn't the other girls and the scheming mammas just glare at me and won't they hate me if I ever go into New York society again. Roger said he'd come to see me if I were going to be in town for long, but I told him I had to leave in two days. He's going to write to me, though, and I mean to kind of keep an eye on him after this. Say, Janey, would you like to have Roger for a brother?"

For scarce a second, Jane hesitated, then said cordially:

"Indeed I would, dear, if you think you would be happy with Roger and could make him happy too. But, dearie me, children, will you look at that clock? Nearly dinner-time already and every one of us still in walking togs and shirt-waists. Hurry, hurry, or we'll all be late and John never likes to eat cold soup, do you, dear?" and Jane laid her hand softly, tenderly on her husband's white hair.

For answer, he caught the hand, held it to his cheek for a second then kissed it very gently. It was the hand that wore his wedding ring.

CHAPTER IV.

PICTURES IN THE FIRE.

"JANE, did you ever waste any of your valuable time looking at pictures in the fire?"

"Why no, John, I don't believe I ever thought of doing such a thing. Why?" and Jane smiled at him as he lounged in his easy-chair beside the open fireplace and gazed thoughtfully into the glowing coals.

"Well, if you can spare a few moments from that eternal knitting of yours—by the way, I should think all the old men and women in the town would be well supplied with warm stockings by this time—I should like very much to show you a few pictures at which I am looking now."

"You blessed old dear," laughed Jane. "No one but you would think of alluding to this pink and white creation as stockings for old men and women. It is a little wrap I am making for Elaine for Christmas. But I should like to see those pictures you speak of, so will lay my knitting aside until to-morrow. No, dear, do not get up; I don't want a chair; I'll just move this ottoman close to your chair and sit at your feet, so." And Jane, leaning back against the arm of his chair, folded her hands in her lap and looked into the fire wondering at this rather strange whim of her husband's.

Possibly guessing her thought, he remarked gently :

"I dare say it seems rather a childish proceeding to you, my dear, but I have a special reason for this as you will see before I am through. I want

you to look right into the heart of the fire, into that glowing little cave among the coals, and try to see these pictures as I see them and as I shall describe them to you. First of all I see a little boy, such a lonely, lonely little chap, wandering from room to room of a great, almost deserted, family mansion, or standing disconsolately at the window looking out upon the dreary street through which but few people pass to and fro. His mother he had never known, for the day that gave him life was her last upon the earth. His only remembrance of his father is of a man who has returned to his home but twice since his wife's death, a man who has never spoken even one word to this, his only child, and before whose frown the boy fled in terror the only time they had met by accident in one of the corridors.

"I see that boy passing from babyhood to childhood, from childhood into youth under the care of a hard-featured, harsh-natured middle-aged spinster whom he calls Aunt, and who hates him as she had hated his young mother before him. Even the servants are old and sour and cranky and there is no one in that household to say a kindly word to that very lonely little lad. There had been one, his nurse, who had known and loved his mother and who watched and tended him with faithful devotion. But one day the stern Aunt had discovered them in the master's den, seated before a picture of a sweet-faced girl, the nurse telling him of the loveliness, and gentleness and kindness of that fair young mother he had never seen, who would have loved and cherished him had she only been spared to do so. The nurse

was dismissed, the door of the den kept locked in future and the boy had never again been able to secure even a glimpse of his mother's picture.

"Now, close your eyes a second, Jane, and when you open them again, there will be another picture for you to look at. This time, I see a youth on his way to college in a large city not far from the town which held his ancestral home. It is the first time he has been outside the walls of his house except for his daily walks, with a maid during his childhood, with his tutor as he grew older. He has never had companions of his own age, never played with other children, never come in contact with any outside his own household. He had often glanced enviously at groups of boys and girls, sometimes ragged, barefooted groups, who romped noisily

and happily. They in turn would stop in their play at times and stare back at him as he marched past with maid or tutor at his side. I dare say they envied him his good clothes, his fine house, his servants and his wealth. God knows, the poor little beggar should have pitied, not envied.

"Well, he is now on his way to college and you can readily imagine the fate that awaits him there. He longs for friends, he longs for kindness and sympathy but he does not know how to meet the advances of the other boys. He is partly afraid of them, partly shy with them and his diffidence is mistaken for pride and sullenness. He knows nothing of boys' games or of sports and his first awkward attempts are greeted with shouts of laughter from thoughtless, however well meaning spectators. Stung by the ridicule he withdraws

more and more into himself and determines, since he cannot hold his own in the social or athletic field, to devote himself to that in which he is right at home. He earns for himself the reputation of being hard, cold, repellant and a recluse, but he also carries all before him in the line of academic honors. His companions hate him and carry that feeling out into the world with them when they leave college and commence their real life.

"The next picture in the series is not a pleasant one to contemplate and we will pass over it as quickly as possible. It is that of a young man who dreams a beautiful dream; a dream so rare and wonderful that the mere thought of it fairly takes his breath away. It is the picture of a young man waking from his dream, his trust betrayed, his youthful ideals

destroyed, all his hopes trampled upon. Never mind how it is done or by whom, but from that day the title of cynic is added to all the other hard names he has been called. Thereafter he devotes himself to business, amasses wealth, though never at the expense of any one else; is feared, hated, respected, and toadied to, but loved by none.

"And now, my dear Jane, I come to the sweetest picture of all. It is the one I love the best and see the oftenest, and one I shall forget, never, never. It is the picture of a stern, gray-haired man, frowning down upon a very small, very angry, little girl. He is so accustomed to seeing people cower before that frown of his, that it is a most refreshing surprise to see this wee lady frown back and openly defy him. Then the lovely smile with which she apologized

when realizing her mistake and the pretty air of command, never doubting but that her behest would be obeyed, when she says: 'Take me to your private office and I'll tell you all about it!'

"Oh! Jane, my Jane, at that moment when you slipped your little hand into mine and looked up at me so confidingly, the world became a different place for me. You will never know what I felt as I sat in my office that day and listened to your story and the pathetic little plea for work so that you might help the folks at home. I longed to gather you up in my arms and hold you safe from all care and worry, you seemed such a baby to me. But though a child in years, those great wistful eyes were the eyes of a woman and I dared not do more than hold your hand.

"A new life began for me on that

day and my one wish, my one thought was to make you happy, you and yours. I watched you grow from childhood into womanhood and each day the thought of you grew more dear, more precious.

"When your father and mother died I would have given all I owned for the right to care for you and shield you always. But I was a man of fifty-eight even then and you only a girl of eighteen. To me it seemed impossible that you could care for one as old as I, so I held my peace and gave you employment by which you could support yourself and brother and sister. For six years I looked on in silence, while you struggled bravely, patiently, to secure the bare necessities of life. It was not until I saw you breaking under the strain of it, growing thinner, paler, every day, that I dared to ask you to become my

wife and let me take you away from drudgery and from care. I had many misgivings at the time, dear, and debated long with myself before I spoke to you. It was you I was thinking of, your happiness I wanted to secure, and yet there was one thing I failed to take into consideration. It is something that never even occurred to me until to-day, and that is the possibility that there might have been some other man, a younger man perhaps, whom you could have preferred to me. Elaine's chatter to-day has set me thinking, child, and I hope, I do sincerely hope that I did you no wrong the day I took you for my wife. These five years have been happy, happy ones for me, my wife, but have they been so for you?"

Jane's voice was deep with feeling as she answered slowly:

"John, dear, I want you to believe

that I speak truly when I tell you that these five years have been the very happiest I have ever known and you are the best and noblest and dearest man in all the wide, wide world."

"God bless you for that, Jane. You have taken a weight of anxiety off my mind. You and your happiness are the most precious things in the world to me. And now, my dear, perhaps you have not yet discovered my reason for showing you those pictures in the fire, so I'll tell you. I have never spoken to you of my early life, because I put it all behind me the day I met you, all the pain, the misunderstanding, the loneliness. Your little hand opened for me the door into a new life which has grown more beautiful each moment I have lived since then. I want you to know this and to remember it always. You are still quite young, dear child, and I am

old, and in the nature of things you will have many, many years to enjoy life after I shall have been laid to rest with my fathers."

"Don't, John, don't talk like that. You must never leave me, never, never!"

"I must say it just this once, dear, and I'll never refer to the subject again. When I am gone, if any other man comes along, any younger man, one whom you knew in the old days perhaps, you must not let any thought of me stand between you and happiness. Living or dead, my one wish is that you shall be happy."

"John Alford," and Jane's voice shook though she tried to speak laughingly, "If you don't stop talking like that you'll have a regular Niobe weeping on your neck in just about a minute and a whole torrent of salt tears will be streaming over that very

becoming new tie of yours. You have years and years to live yet. You may be sixty-nine your next birthday but you don't look fifty and at heart you are just as much of a boy as Richard is. We have five perfectly happy years to look back to and we'll have five times five, just as happy, before we need even think of separation."

"God grant it, my wife, God grant it."

"Amen!" responded Jane fervently.

CHAPTER V.

JANE'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT.

"OH! Nunkey dear, I've had such a perfectly heavenly time this afternoon. You'd never believe all the dreadful places we've been to and all the dreadful people we've seen. I could just sit down and cry my head off when I think of some of them."

"Dear me, child, is that your idea of a perfectly heavenly time? Dreadful places, dreadful people and then crying your head off afterwards," and John Alford reached up and playfully pinched the girl's cheek as she sat on the arm of his chair.

"Now, Nunkey, just quit your teasing. You know right well what I mean. Some of it was dreadful, per-

fectly dreadful, but it was all lovely too."

"How a thing can be perfectly dreadful and lovely at the same time is beyond the power of my limited masculine mind to conceive. Proceed to enlighten me by telling me just where you went and whom you saw. I see I'm in for an awful dose of chatter," and the man settled back in his chair with a rueful face, a resigned sigh and a wicked twinkle in the corner of his eye.

Jane, entering at the moment, smiled at the two in the armchair and crossing to her work-table by the window, seated herself in her rocker and took up her knitting.

"What are you two quarreling over, now?" she demanded.

"We're not quarreling, Janey dear, but Nunkey is in one of his very worst old tantrums, tells me I don't know

what I'm talking about and won't listen to me when I try to explain. You know perfectly well that when he makes up his mind to take the floor, no one gets even the ghost of a chance to say so much as yea or nay. So now, Nunkey, if you can possibly keep quiet long enough, I'll tell you what Jane and I were doing all this afternoon.

"So Jane was with you, was she? Well then, since this is Christmas Eve, I can tell you at once without cutting the cards or reading your palm, that you have spent the afternoon with Jane's friends in the tenements and hovels in the town below. And I understand now your use of the two adjectives, dreadful and lovely. Tell me about it, will you, Baby?"

"Well, the first of it was funny, awfully funny. It was a perfect shame that you were taking your nap and could not see us drive off on the seat of

that queer-looking team Jane hired. Imagine Jackson and Jane and me all squeezed into the seat of an open wagon that was a cross between an express wagon and a butcher's cart."

"But why choose a strange mode of conveyance? Why did you not take the carriage?" John inquired of his wife.

"You see, John," she answered: "I want all my friends in the tenements to feel that I am really their friend, really one of them. The truly deserving poor are sometimes very proud and sensitive so I always go to them on foot or" smiling at the recollection "on the seat of a delivery wagon. If I went in a carriage they might think I had come merely to pry and patronize."

"Just like you, Jane, just like you. But what does Jackson think of it all? How does his dignity stand the shock

of descending from his perch on the carriage and his mettled steeds, to the seat of an express team and one broken-down old cob?"

"That was part of the fun, Nunkey, to see Jackson try to square his shoulders and look dignified when every few moments that old horse would stumble and nearly yank Jackson, reins and whip and all over the footboard onto his back."

"Jackson was one funny item in the afternoon's program, but the very funniest of all was something that happened just as we crossed the bridge and turned into Main Street. Oh! Nunkey, I nearly die when I think of it. You know Mrs. Clarence Jones-Browne, of course, *the* Mrs. Jones-Browne," and Elaine mimicked that worthy lady's pompous tones so perfectly, looking at them the while through an imaginary lorgnette, that

both her listeners burst into irrepressible laughter. "Well, my dear, there was Jonesie just sailing down the steps of her highly aristocratic mansion, with her aristocratic nose in the air and her latest importation from Lunnon standing at attention with his hand on the carriage door holding it open for her queenship to enter and make a round of afternoon calls upon her select circle of acquaintances. Jonesie's aristocratic foot had just been lifted preparatory to finding a resting place upon the steps of her carriage, when her haughtily indifferent glance happened to rest upon us and our equipage. I'd give my next quarter's allowance and go without candy for a year if I could have had a picture of her at that moment. Her foot remained suspended in mid-air, her mouth and eyes opened wider and wider. The expression on her

face was a study as she looked first at Jane, then at me, then at the baskets in the team behind us, from which any number of chicken legs were sticking out promiscuous like, bunches of celery stood up and nodded their heads at her and bundles of all sorts and shapes and sizes were piled up in delightful confusion. I just laughed out loud, I couldn't help it, Jane, honest I couldn't, but Jane only smiled that placid smile of hers and called out sweetly:

"'How do you do, Mrs. Jones-Browne? If it be not a little premature, may I wish you a very happy Christmas?'

"At that, Jones-Browne gave a snort, tried to find the step with her foot, missed it and tumbled headlong into the carriage. The last I saw of her were her feet waving frantically as the footman tried to fish her out

and get her into an upright position again.

"Well, we kept on our way, not a whit annoyed at *the* Mrs. Browne's disapproval, and I wish you could have seen all the places we went to. I can't remember half of them. We went down into cellars, up into attics, and one visit was to a loft over a deserted stable. Think of it, Nunkey, think of it! To have no place to live except one room in the attic of a barn. A woman and her daughter live there and the girl is a hopeless invalid. I must say the room is tidy and comfortable and warm, and the woman says she has plenty of work now, thanks to our Jane, and they never want for food or fire. It must have been awful, Jane, when you found her. She told me all about it when you were hobnobbing over in the corner with the sick girl. She

said they'd no fire and nothing to eat for nearly two days, the windows were all broken and stuffed with rags and the daughter was just crying with pain and cold and hunger. But Jane found them and took care of them ever since."

"But why leave them in the stable, Jane; could you not have found a little tenement for them?" asked John.

"They are an excellent example of what I meant when I spoke just now of the pride of some of our most deserving poor. Those two women would not accept charity. They let me send them a little food and coal at first, but all they would take beyond that was work for the mother whereby she could support them both."

"Well, anyway, Nunkey, they are getting on all right now and when I said to the sick girl that I thought it

must be awful to live in a stable, she smiled so prettily and said:

"'The One Who holds the world in the hollow of His Hand chose to make His home in a stable. What was good enough for Him is surely good enough for me.'

"Then we went on to ever so many more places, but there's only one more I think will interest you. It was a horrid, dirty, dark old tenement and we had to climb a dozen flights of stairs, more or less, to reach the people we came to see. Just at the top of the last flight, Jane, who was in advance, nearly stumbled over something lying curled up in a heap on the step. It was dark, I could not see what it was, but Jane stooped down and then gave a funny little cry as she picked it up in her arms and fairly banged open a door at the right. Say, Nunkey, did you ever see Jane

mad, just mad through and through?"

"I think I did, the very first time I saw her, but never since then," and John Alford smiled at the remembrance.

"But not mad like she was to-day. Gee! Nunkey, I was scared blue and expected nothing short of three murders in the first act. She stalked over to a chair and sat down and then I saw what she had picked up on the stairs: a little bit of a girl, a pretty, sweet little thing too, in spite of rags and dirt. She had such sad, sad, terribly sad blue eyes and gave one frightened look around, then hid her face in Jane's neck and clung to her for dear life. And then Jane lit into those people for fair. Honest, I'd never have believed she could do it and her eyes just blazed at them, she was so mad. There was a woman there and three or four boys and they

were sitting around a table eating. I don't know whether you'd call it lunch or tea or dinner since it was about three in the afternoon. It seems that the poor little girl is deaf and dumb and is only a distant relative of theirs. Her father and mother were killed in an accident a few weeks ago and this woman had to take her for she had no place to go. They don't treat her any too well, I should say to judge by what we saw to-day. There was a long mark across her cheek and neck as if the woman had struck at her with a strap and had then put her out into the freezing cold entryway while they ate their dinner. The woman said she was a 'stubborn critter and always gettin' under foot an' bein' in the way.' Jane cuddled and petted the baby and laid out the whole bunch of 'em by turns, and we didn't leave until the little girl was

sound asleep and the woman scared half out of her senses. Jane never does anything by halves and when she gets mad, she's just proper mad, so she is. Take my advice, Nunkey, and don't ever rile that fearful temper of hers, if you know which side your bread's buttered on. But hark! What melodious sound is that which cleaveth so sweetly the frosty air without? 'Tis the appointed signal at last, at last. I come, my trusty knight, I come. In other words, good people, Richard promised to show me the new puppies and that whistle means he is nearly ready to take me to the stables. So long, see you all later."

For several moments silence reigned in Jane's sitting-room, which was, by the way, the favorite refuge and general living-room, of the entire family. As Richard once said: "Jane's den is everybody's home."

John Alford smiled as he watched his wife's preoccupied, somewhat anxious face. Her placid countenance so seldom showed traces of care or worry that he wondered what the trouble could be and smiled to himself contentedly, feeling sure that whatever it was he could set it right.

"A penny for your thoughts, my dear," he said presently. Jane glanced up quickly and returned his smile.

"I was just wondering what you were going to give me for Christmas, John."

"That is a strange coincidence, because I was just wondering what you would say when I told you what I am going to give you for a Christmas present. Is there anything very special that you want?"

"There is something very, very special that I want to ask you to give

me. It is a great favor I want you to grant."

"It is granted already. What is it, dear?"

"You blessed man," laughed Jane. "How you do spoil me!"

"That is the end and aim of my existence, young lady, but so far I have not succeeded in doing it. What is this favor you want me to grant?"

"It is not an ordinary every-day favor, John, and I'm just a little bit afraid you won't approve of it in the least."

"Janey, if you asked me to get you a piece of the moon, I'd immediately arm myself with carving knives and hatchets, spend a few stray pennies upon an aeroplane and at least make an attempt to reach the moon and bring you back a nice pie-shaped wedge of green cheese."

"And if you should succeed, think

of the consternation and dismay you would cause to the world of science. How do you suppose the learned astronomers would ever account for the sudden change in Madame Luna's appearance? But I don't want any moon or any green cheese, John. I want to adopt little Catherine Cameron; bring her here and keep her always for my very own."

"And who is Catherine Cameron?" John asked quietly.

"She is the poor little deaf and dumb girl Elaine told you of a short while ago. The child we found on the stairway this afternoon. She is a dear sweet little girl and simply devoted to me. Her father and mother were such nice people, poor but hard-working, honest folks and they loved the child and petted and cared for her tenderly. That baby's heart is just breaking with the awful people who

have her now. I want to take her away from them and give her the love and kindness her sensitive little soul needs and longs for. Poor tot, I'll never forget the way her eyes pleaded with me and her small hands clung to me. I want her dreadfully, John, may I have her?"

"You certainly may, if it will make you any happier, my Jane."

"Really, John, really?" Jane was almost speechless with delight and wonder at his ready acquiescence. "May I go now, at once, and bring her home? I hate to think of her as being even one more night in that dreadful place."

"Bring her home whenever you like, dear. But are you sure they will let you have her?"

"Let me have her?" scornfully. "That woman will go down on her knees and thank me for taking her.

She's a hard, selfish, cruel creature and will think she is well rid of a troublesome incumbrance."

"Then put on your wraps at once, little woman, and bring the child home with you. I know you'll not be happy till you have her safely here." And John smiled kindly as Jane simply flew out of the room to do his bidding. But the smile faded as the door closed behind her and he leaned his head on his hand and sighed wearily. "Little girl, little girl," he murmured, "I'd give my life to make you happy, and yet, and yet——"

The sound of a merry laugh floated up from the driveway below. John Alford walked to the window and watched the scene beneath. Jane had met Elaine and Richard returning from inspecting the new puppies. She was evidently explaining her

errand to them, for Elaine was dancing up and down and clapping her hands joyously. Richard must have made some teasing remark just then, for his two sisters suddenly threw themselves upon him bodily, and being taken unawares, he was soon rolling over and over in a snow-bank. The sisters fled, laughing, down the driveway and Richard, regaining his feet, was after them like the wind, pelting them with snowballs as he ran. The man at the window smiled whimsically as he watched them.

"What children they are," he said musingly. "Even Jane, in spite of her twenty-nine years, is nothing but a baby in some ways; my good little Jane! It makes a chap like me feel horribly old, though; horribly old."

CHAPTER VI.

AUF WIEDERSEHEN.

"I DO think this has been just the loveliest, happiest, most beautifullest Christmas I have ever spent. What do you think, Janey?" and Elaine sighed contentedly as she half knelt, half sat upon the floor beside John Alford's couch. Their early supper over, they had gathered in the den, for John complained of feeling slightly tired and Jane suggested that he lie on the couch to rest a while.

"Would you prefer to be alone and quiet, John, or shall we all come too, and spend the evening in the den as a change from my sitting-room?" she had asked.

"Don't leave me, dear," he answered.

"I want you all with me to-night. I can lie quietly and listen to your talk and will enjoy it very much."

In answer to Elaine's question, Jane looked tenderly down at the golden head resting upon her shoulder, then across to her husband and said softly:

"I think, Elaine, dear, this has been the very happiest day of my whole life, thanks to John's goodness and generosity."

"And allow me to say," retorted John, "that the day I met you, Jane, was the happiest of my life up till then, but each day that has passed since has been happier than the one before."

"Hear, hear," broke in Richard laughing and clapping his hands.

Elaine gave a little scream of pretended dismay.

"You incorrigible pair of turtle-doves, stop it this minute before you

demoralize that blessed infant in Jane's arms. Your bad example might be contagious and we'll see her making love to Dickie next thing we know."

"You forget, Elaine," this very gently from Richard, "the poor little thing cannot hear a word we say."

"Right you are, Dickie, she cannot hear us nor understand what we say, but she does understand every blessed thing Jane says to her. I never saw anything like it; those two have a language all their own and they talk it with their eyes. Tell us how you manage it, Janey."

"I don't know, dear, we just seem to understand each other that's all. I think she knows by intuition how much I love her, my poor little pet, and somehow love can make us understand anything. She must be very tired, see, she has fallen sound asleep

while we were talking. I was just going to carry her off to bed, but I'll wait now and let her have her nap right here in my arms. The darling; you don't know how grateful I am for the Christmas present you have given me, John. For all the Christmas presents, in fact, for every one of them was beautiful."

"Yes, Nunkey, you best and nicest and preciousest of men, you've given us all a beautiful, beautiful day and we're ever so grateful to you, aren't we, Dickie?"

"My sentiments exactly," responded Richard heartily.

"Well, baby, I am very thankful if it has been given me to make you three happy. That is all I have to live for, child." There was a strained, weary note in the man's voice and Elaine leaned over him anxiously.

"Anything wrong, Nunkey? You look dreadfully white and tired."

"No, little goose, only a pain I've had rather frequently of late. When people grow old, you know, rheumatism and various other ills and aches are always lying in ambush and ready to spring on them without a moment's warning. There, it is all gone now and I think if you will sing for me, I could fall asleep very easily and have a nice little nap. Then, when I awake we'll have our usual game of cribbage. I bet you a box of candy you'll not beat your poor old Nunkey to-night in the shameless way you've been doing for the past week."

"And I bet you ten kisses I'll beat you all to a frazzle, you impertinent Nunkey."

"I'll take you, my dear, and suppose you give me just one kiss in advance for I'm going to win that bet.

I know I will. Thank you. Now sing for me, Elaine, and I'll try to sleep."

"What shall I sing, dear?"

"Something sweet and simple, a few of these old Scotch ballads that I love. Begin with one about 'Jean, Jean, my bonnie Jean,'" and his eyes rested for a second upon his wife rocking to and fro, softly caressing the pretty golden curls of the child in her arms. Then they closed and taking the man's hand in hers and stroking it in time with the music, Elaine began to sing, softly, sweetly, of a "bonnie blue-eyed Scotch lassie, Jean." Presently, Jane rose quietly and left the room carrying little Catherine up to her hastily improvised nursery, a small room next to Jane's own chamber, with a door between which she could leave open at night so as to be at hand if the child should need anything.

Returning to the den some little time later, she paused inside the door and an amused smile passed across her face at the scene her eyes encountered. John Alford had evidently been lulled to sleep by Elaine's singing, and she in turn had dozed off, sitting on the floor beside him, her cheek resting upon his hand, which she still held in hers. Jane tiptoed softly across the room motioning to Richard to call his attention to the pretty picture of the white-haired man and the slight, childish-looking girl of seventeen. Reaching the couch she stood looking down on them, the smile still upon her face.

The next moment her startled, horrified cry of "Dickie, Dickie, come here quick," sent the book Richard was reading flying out of his hand to the floor and brought him to her side like a flash.

"What is it, Sis, what is it?" he exclaimed frightened by her appearance.

Elaine woke up with a start and she too cried: "What is it, what's the matter?"

One glance at John Alford and the question was answered. For a moment, silence reigned, a silence of horrified bewilderment. Then Elaine flung herself upon him, holding his hand, smoothing his forehead, calling him all the pet names she could think of and weeping piteously.

"Oh? Nunkey, Nunkey, darling, speak to me, speak to me! It's just your own little Elaine, your baby, to whom you've never yet refused a single thing. Nunkey, Nunkey, you best and dearest and nicest of men, the only Daddy I ever knew, just say one little bit of a word to your Elaine. Don't look like that, so cold and

stony; open your eyes and smile at me same as you always do. Oh, Richard! Oh, Janey! What will we do, what will we do?"

The girl collapsed onto the floor in a paroxysm of crying, but Jane stood silent and motionless looking down upon the man who had given her everything she possessed and whose every thought had been for her and hers. For five years she had striven earnestly and loyally to be to him all that he desired, but in her heart she knew she had failed. Richard put his arm about her and sought to lead her from the room. She looked up at him, her face drawn and white, but absolutely tearless.

"Oh! Dickie, Dickie, to go like this, without a word, without a sign. He was so good, so good. I'd always hoped——"

"I know, Sis; I know, dear, I'm

only a poor human creature and I suppose not competent to judge in such matters, but if ever a man deserved eternal happiness, that man was John Alford. His was the noblest, the grandest, the most beautiful soul I have ever known, and we knew each other well and loved each other well, dear old John."

Tears of which he was not ashamed, streamed down Richard's cheeks as he continued:

"This is not a surprise to me, Sis. John has been expecting just this for several months now. It was his heart. He knew about it and told me but did not want you to be worried. He told me only a few days ago that he had set everything in order and was ready for the end. He said when it came to give you his love and tell you not to grieve or worry for he was happy."

"I wish I had known, I wish I had known," was all Jane said as Richard led her away. Hours later she sat in her own room, hands idly folded in her lap, eyes staring dazedly before her. So had she sat since Richard had brought her upstairs and left her in the care of the still weeping Elaine. The latter was standing at the head of the stairs watching her brother mount slowly and heavily. Doctors had come and gone after the briefest of examinations.

"It is awful, Dickie, perfectly awful. There she sits like a stone image and I can't get her to speak to me or take any notice of what I say to her. Dickie, for goodness sake do something, will you."

"I'll do what I can, Elaine." And together they entered Jane's room.

Richard laid his hand on her shoulder and shook her ever so gentle.

"I say, Sis."

"Yes, Dickie boy." She answered mechanically but looking neither to right nor left, nor moving so much as a finger.

Richard looked helplessly at Elaine, then both turned, startled by a sound behind them. Their faces brightened and the same thought flashed through both minds on the instant. Help had come from an unexpected quarter. In the doorway between Jane's room and the nursery little Catherine stood wide-eyed and frightened. She stared from one to another but did not advance a step towards the silent group watching. Richard turned Jane's chair so that her eyes would fall upon the trembling little figure in the doorway. A second later the child was in Jane's arm, her baby hands wiping away the tears that flowed in torrents, her baby face expressing a

world of love and sympathy. Richard and Elaine stole softly from the room and closed the door behind them.

CHAPTER VII.

ROGER IS COMING.

PEOPLE who knew Jane Alford best said she was probably the only woman in the world absolutely devoid of vanity, yet, on a certain night in early May, could those same people have looked into the white and gold nest that was Jane's bedroom, they would have found her seated before her dressing-table, lights flaring brightly and Jane herself eagerly scanning the face reflected in the mirror.

"Thirty-three," she whispered to herself. "Thirty-three, and sometimes I have felt about fifty. I wonder if I have changed much in the last nine years, I wonder." Then,

her eyes meeting the rather anxious ones that looked back at her from the mirror, she laughed right heartily and shook her finger at the woman in the looking-glass. "You silly old Jane," she cried. "Instead of learning sense as you grow older, you are becoming a perfect fool. What do years matter, what do looks matter, when the heart is young and happy, happy, happy. I wonder if it is wrong for me to be so happy. It is what John himself would have wished. I know it is; dear, good, unselfish John."

Extinguishing the lights on the dressing-table she crossed to the window, threw it wide open and wrapping a soft shawl about her shoulders, drew up a low lounging chair and gave herself up to memories of the past.

She thought of the four years that had come and gone since that Christ-

mas night which had made her a widow.

How she had missed him, the kind, thoughtful man who had surrounded her with every care, everything the human heart could ask for. For nearly three years, she and Elaine and little Catherine had lived abroad, for she could not bear the sight of the home which reminded her so constantly of all she had lost. Richard, from his Seminary, wrote regularly and his letters gave her more comfort than anything else. They would probably have been abroad still had it not been for that sudden, serious illness which had attacked Richard just one year ago. Summoned by cable, she had come to Richard's bedside as fast as trains and steamers would bring her. Never would she forget that journey, never, never. The long interminable days when she

paced the deck impatiently wondering why they were traveling with such exasperating slowness. The truth was, the captain, who had recently become a widower for the fourth time and was greatly attracted by his wealthy and also widowed passenger, was making all haste possible and had given orders to crowd on all the steam it was safe to carry. The long, weary nights when she tossed in her berth thinking always of Richard and not daring to imagine what might be waiting for her at her journey's end. If she lost Richard, then indeed would life not be worth the living. And for several days after she reached him it seemed as if that would be the outcome. What Jane suffered in those hours when she sat beside him trying hard to say "Thy will be done," none but she would ever know, and when finally

the crisis was over and Dickie on the road to recovery, it was a very white-faced, very tired but very happy Jane who went out to the old home on the banks of the Hudson river and proceeded to open the house and have all in readiness for Richard's arrival as soon as he could leave the hospital. It was his own wish that the days of convalescence be spent in the home John Alford had given them.

It was then, on just such a warm May day as this had been, that Roger's letter had come to her. It had been a distinct shock to her in one way, because it brought home to her for the first time the fact that she was free once more. Strange as it may seem, in all the three years of her widowhood, her thoughts had all been with the man who was gone. She had considered herself as belonging absolutely to him and the idea of a

possible second marriage had never entered her mind. If she thought of the future at all it was simply to picture herself planning for Elaine and caring for her and little Catherine. She would devote herself to them and to her friends in the tenements as soon as she could make up her mind to go home and settle down into a quiet routine of duty and charity. Such had been the life she had mapped out for herself. Then came Roger's letter; short, simple and so thoroughly characteristic.

"Dear Jane—

"I have waited long and waited patiently. When may I come to you?

"Roger."

For two days, Jane had pondered deeply in genuine distress and doubt. Then she wrote:

"Not yet, Roger, not yet. Some day perhaps. Possibly never.

"Jane."

That had been a year ago and since then she had heard of him only through Elaine, who had spent most of her time in New York on prolonged visits to her friends, the Fosters. Nearly every letter contained some allusion to Roger, who had evidently been very attentive to the girl during the season just over. Jane laughed softly to herself as she thought of some of those letters. In one received quite recently, Elaine had written:

"I wish you were here, Janey, to see what fun I'm having. All the girls and the managing Mammas just hate me, though they smile and kiss me and call me a sweet child. They look as if they'd like to bite me and it

takes all the courage I possess to keep from dodging when I see one of them make ready to peck at me with lips that I know will be saying all sorts of dreadful things about me just as soon as they are out of my sight. And why, you may ask, this hatred of a perfectly harmless and really interesting and attractive young lady? Thank you for the compliment, I quite agree with you for once in my life. The trouble is, my dear, the most lionized, most popular, most eligible, young man in 'our set' (I quote Mrs. Jones-Browne) will waltz with me as I let him and never with other girls unless he is obliged to. That same popular individual sends me candy and flowers galore and actually seems to enjoy talking to me when he is only just polite and civil to other women, except the very old ones. He is a perfect dear to all old

ladies. They worship him and knit him ties and socks and slippers of all shapes and sizes and such variegated colors that Joseph's coat they tell us of in the Bible would grow pale with chagrin and fade away into nothingness should it happen to pay a visit to Roger's room about Christmas time. You'd never guess the idea these good people have in their stupid old heads. They think Roger is in love with me, and just to plague them I help along the delusion all I can, smile mysteriously at the hints they throw out, and all the time I'm having a good laugh at them behind their backs. Isn't it funny, Roger in love with me? Tee, hee, and ha, ha, and ho, ho, says you, for we know, you and I, where Roger's heart really is, don't we, Janey? And oh! Janey dear, please make up your mind to be good to him and see him soon. He's such a

dear and so awfully good. You'd never believe all the splendid things he does and never lets on to anyone. Even I wouldn't know anything about it if it weren't for the doctor. By the way, I've never told you about him, have I? He's heaps of fun and Roger's best friend. The first time I saw him I nearly died trying to keep from laughing right in his face. Gee, I never suffered so in all my life. In the first place, he's really quite old, must be nearly thirty-six I should say, and what little hair he has is a brilliant, vivid red. He has round blue eyes that look like a good-natured baby's, a round rosy face and is very short and very stout. Roger is simply wild about him, says he's the cleverest doctor and goodest man he's ever met.

"Roger introduced him to me, and, honest, you'd think the funny little doctor was a king if you could see the

way Roger spoke his name to me. I really felt as if I should salaam to the ground before his royal highness instead of merely murmuring that I was so pleased to meet him. By the way, dear, this wonderful individual rejoices in the poetic front name of Samuel. I've seen him quite often this winter, for Roger brings him along nearly every time he calls on us, and lately Samuel has been dropping in all by his lonesome whenever he gets a few moments to breathe. He's an awfully busy man, too, and I tell Adelaide she ought to pat herself on the back to think of such a famous man wasting so much of his valuable time upon her. He is wasting his time, too, I'm afraid, for she simply can't abide him. Little fool, she don't know when she's lucky. Poor little Sammy may not be very handsome but he's a *man*, every inch of him,

and the most perfect gentleman I've ever met. And oh, Janey, what do you suppose he's been and gone and done? Be sure and have smelling salts handy, for, though I know you've never fainted in your life, you surely will when you read this. He's actually succeeded in getting your silly, rattle-brained little sister, interested in the work he is doing for the poor little children and sick people in the slums of New York. He does a heap of charity work and sometimes gets me to go and visit some of his patients and sit and read to them by the hour. I like it, too, for its always such nice, kind people that he sends me to.

"And you'll never guess who has been, as he says, 'his right bower' for the last five or six years. None other than our Roger. I saw him once steal away from a terribly swell social

function where everyone was ready to kow-tow to him and thought he was going home or off to have a good time at his club. Then, the next day, the doctor told me how Roger had sat the whole night beside a young boy in whom he is interested and who is very sick and very poor. Another time there was a laborer terribly hurt and taken to the hospital. He'd lost so much blood they didn't think he could possibly pull through, but would die of sheer weakness. His family was one of those on the doctor's list, so Samuel went to the hospital to see him. The medicos held a very serious pow-wow among themselves and decided to try infusion of blood if they could find anyone who would give it to them. Sammy offered his, but Roger heard what they were going to do and said it wasn't right for Sammy to do such a thing because

so many people would suffer if anything happened to him. Roger gave his blood to the poor laborer and the man is alive and well to-day and working hard to support his family.

"I tried to speak to Roger about his goodness and charity once, but he just calmly and coolly brushed the matter aside and began talking about the latest light opera. He hates to have people know what he does for the poor. But one day, not long ago, I caught him red-handed, and oh! it was too funny for anything. I must tell you about it, though goodness knows this letter is quite long enough as it is.

"You see, dear, it was like this. Doctor had asked me to go and see a young girl in one of his tenements who was quite sick and very blue and despondent. He thought I might cheer her up and make her feel better.

Well, I knew the street because I'd been there before, but somehow I forgot the number of the house. I went into the first house I came to, and, as the tenement on the lower floor was vacant, climbed the rickety stairs and knocked on a door at the top. No one answered but I could hear some children making a dreadful racket inside, so I opened the door and walked in. I laugh now till I cry, when I think of what I saw. In the middle of the floor, on his hands and knees, was Roger, with a very dirty little boy astride his back and two more boys leading him along by a string they had twisted around his head and through his mouth to imitate a horse's bridle. All I could do was to stare at them, and I know my mouth must have been wide open and my eyes nearly popping out of my head.

"Roger looked calmly up at me

from the floor and actually grinned at my amazement.

"'A miracle, a miracle" he drawled in the most aggravating fashion. 'Our chattering magpie is speechless for the first time in her life.'

"Even then all I could do was to stammer feebly, 'Roger, for heaven's sake, can that be you?'

"'Surest thing you know,' says he, quite gaily.

"'Then,' says I, getting my wits back from wherever they'd flown to, 'Get up off your knees and stop making a donkey of yourself.'

"'Donkey,' says he, highly indignant. 'Donkey indeed! I'd have you understand, young lady, I'm a mettlesome steed from the deserts of Arabia and these, my masters, are scions of nomadic kings.'

"'Nomadic fiddlesticks,' says I. 'Think how your clothes will look

when you get through, and for goodness' sake think how perfectly ridiculous you are in that most undignified position. Oh! Roger, what wouldn't I give to have Mrs. Jones-Browne see you this blessed minute. Imagine her face if she could look in here now.'

"'I couldn't,' says Roger, laughing, 'And I've a pretty vivid imagination too.'

"Then he got the youngster off his back, stood up and was just taking the bridle off when the children's mother came in. Roger introduced me to her and then hurried me away with him so as to escape her thanks and praises, but I went back a few days later and found out all about it. Her husband was sick and in the hospital, and it was very hard for her to go and see him on account of the three little boys, the oldest being only six. She was a stranger in the place and didn't like to

bother the neighbors, so Roger used to go nearly every day and take care of the children for her so she could spend an hour with her sick husband. Now, what do you think of Roger, Jane? And how soon are you going to let him see you? He has never spoken of you even once, but I guess I know what he's thinking about pretty often and I read your letters to him and sort of keep him posted in an easy off-hand manner. For goodness' sake make up your mind soon or I'll keep that old threat of mine and marry him myself. Next to you, I know he thinks I'm the very nicest girl in all the world. Guess he's pretty near right, too, what do you think, Janey dear?"

Jane could think of only one thing that May night, as she watched the stars from her open window. That was that she was happy, happy,

happy, and that Roger was coming to-morrow.

A telegram had reached her early that morning. It was as follows:

"Business takes me to your neighborhood to-morrow. May I call?

"Roger."

Jane's answer had been but one word: "Yes."

CHAPTER VIII.

"DEER JANE."

MECHANICALLY, Jane folded the letter she had just read through for the second time and slipped it into its envelope; the letter which had come as a bolt from the blue. Was it possible that only a short half hour ago she had said to herself she was the very happiest woman in all the world and had thanked God for sending her such happiness? She and Catherine had romped like foolish children over the lawn and through the shrubbery, dear little Catherine, who was now gathering a bunch of early violets to place upon the table in honor of Roger's coming. How bright had seemed the sunshine; how beautiful

the world and then had come the morning mail bringing this letter from Elaine.

"DEAREST JANEY:

"You'll receive this in the first mail to-morrow and in about an hour afterwards you'll see the writer of it and, Janey, I'm so happy, so very happy, and I've just the wonderfullest piece of news to tell you. I didn't intend going down to see you personally. I was just going to write about it, but when Roger told me this afternoon that he was going to run down to see you in the morning, says I to myself, says I, I'll just drop a clean pocket handkerchief and a toothbrush into a handbag and take the same train Roger does! Then, too, I was awfully afraid you might cut up rough when you hear what I'm going to tell you. I thought you mightn't be quite

pleased and I'll feel better if Roger is along too to back me up. He thinks you'll be delighted and says if you raise any objections he'll squelch 'em all. Those aren't his exact words but that's the idea. In fact, he offered to break the news to you himself and then let me come on later; but I guess it's better to face the music at once, so we'll be down on the first train in the morning to beg your blessing and consent. Have you guessed my news, you blessed old dear? Right you are, the very first time. I'm engaged to be married and oh! Janey, he says he only discovered the fact a few days ago, but he knows he's loved me ever since the first day he saw me. And I never guessed it and certainly never thought I could fall in love with him though I've been dreadfully fond of him always, always. So now, Sister mine, be prepared to receive me nicely

to-morrow and make me the happiest girl in the wide, wide world by giving us your blessing."

Elaine engaged to be married and to Roger! Jane's mind could scarcely grasp the fact. So that was why Roger had wished to see her, that was the reason for his telegram. And all the time she had imagined— What a fool she had been, what a fool. Well, she had only herself to blame. If, one year ago, she had only sent a different answer to his letter! She could easily see how, hurt and wounded by that indifferent "some day perhaps; possibly never," the man had turned for comfort to the girl who had been as a dear little comrade and sister to him all her life. He had found consolation and now they were both coming to her with their great happiness to receive her

blessing and approval. Well, they would never know what a blow the news had been to her. She would hide her pain and rejoice with them in their happiness. As for herself and her future, she would find something to do, something to fill her days and make her forget.

A tug at her sleeve broke in upon her reverie and she looked up with a start. Little Catherine was standing beside her, eyeing her with evident concern and holding up for her inspection the violets she had gathered. On more than one occasion Jane had noticed that the poor little girl who could neither speak, nor hear, possessed a strange power of divining instantly pain or worry in the minds of those she loved, a power to almost read into their very souls. Jane placed her arm around the child, and smoothed back the golden curls.

"Thank God, I have you, my chiefest comfort, my little Christmas present. I have you to live for anyway. We might go away again, just you and I, and travel in strange lands and meet strange people and find healing and forgetfulness. I should like that, I think, but that would mean to play the coward for the second time. We'll not be a coward now, little Catherine, will we? We'll stay right here and face it all. I'll take care of you and have someone who has been specially fitted for the task come here and live with us and teach you everything you ought to know.

"Then there are those poor factory and mill people over there in the town. I can do much for them, very much. In making other people happy, we shall be happy also. And we must begin right now, baby mine, for

they'll be here soon and they must never know, they must never know."

An hour later, from the nursery window, Jane saw them coming up the drive. Leaving little Catherine to pore over some new picture books she descended the stairs, opened the door and stepped out upon the veranda to meet them. Seeing her, Elaine flew up the steps and nearly smothered her in a boisterous embrace.

"You dear, precious, old sister, how sweet you look, and not a day older than I do. I wish you'd tell me how you manage. Is it that perfectly lovely white frock you are wearing or the violets, or what? You're kind of pale, though, lovey. Aren't you feeling well?"

Jane blushed guiltily when she remembered why she had donned the frock Elaine admired, and taken such

pains arranging her hair and the violets in the lace at her neck. It had been before she received that letter. Roger found no words to respond to her greeting, but took her outstretched hand in silence and looked eagerly into the face he had not seen in nine long years. Jane's eyes fell before his and turning quickly she led the way indoors.

Elaine allowed no time for greetings or inquiries. Without waiting to remove hat or gloves, she fairly shoved Jane into a rocking-chair and, dropping to her knees and flinging her arms around Jane's waist exclaimed anxiously:

"Well, Janey, how did you like my news? Were you glad or sorry and are you going to be good or cut up rough about it?"

"I was glad, dear; very, very glad to think my little sister was going to

be happy with one of the best of men," and Jane patted her sister's cheek and smiled at Roger standing with his elbow on the mantel and looking down upon them delightedly.

"Oh! I'm so glad, Janey, so glad," with a rapturous hug that made poor Jane gasp for breath. "He isn't *one* of the best men; he's the very best, isn't he, Roger?" Elaine smiled archly up at Roger who answered readily:

"Yes, little girl, the very best."

Jane frowned ever so slightly. The old Roger, the Roger whom she had known and admired so greatly, would not have stood like that and proclaimed himself the very best of men. "Success must have turned his head," she thought. "What a pity!"

"And Janey dear, when I think of all he has done and how grand and good and noble he is, it makes me feel like an insignificant little goose. But

I'm going to try awfully, awfully hard to grow better and better every day and perhaps in time, I may be good enough even for him. How long do you think it will take me, Roger?"

"Well, if you try hard enough you may succeed in a dozen years or so," remarked Roger gravely.

Jane looked at him quickly, indignantly. "What insufferable conceit," she thought. "My precious little sister is too good even now for any man living, no matter how wonderful he may be."

Then she caught Roger's eye and the twinkle in it showed he was only teasing. Still his manner did not please her and she felt distinctly disappointed in the man.

"I always knew he was awfully good and kind, but I never knew until a few weeks ago just how splendid he really is," went on Elaine mus-

ingly. "I don't believe I'd have ever known if it hadn't been for Mrs. Mulligan's little girl, and he says it was because of her that he found out how much he cared for me. You see, Janey, Mrs. Mulligan, with her very large family of boys, is one of our pet proteges. She's just the dearest, jolliest, funniest woman you ever saw. She's a widow with six sons that range along like little steps of stairs from baby Jack, who is two, to Jimmie, aged ten. She's a scrub woman in one of the big office buildings down town. Roger got her the job when Mr. Mulligan died and she had to go to work to support the kids (I mean children, Jane. I'm never going to talk slang any more, but try to be nice and ladylike and good like you). Besides the boys there is one girl, the oldest of all, such a dear motherly old-fashioned little thing.

She helps her mother all she can when not at school, but is very delicate and sick quite often. About a month ago little Annie was taken very ill suddenly and her mother sent one of the boys over to tell me and to say that Annie kept calling for me to come to her. I love her dearly, Jane, and she is very fond of me. I dressed and went over there as fast as I could, but he had reached her before I did and wouldn't let me into her room. I never saw him excited or nervous before, but he got almost mad when I said I would go in and neither he nor anyone else could keep me out.

"'But you don't understand,' he said then. 'It's diphtheria, the most malignant form. You really must not take the risk.'

"'And how about you,'—says I. 'Isn't the risk as great for you?'

"'Oh! that's different,' says he. 'I

know how to take precautions and besides I meet this sort of thing every day. It's business, you know.'

"'Well then,' says I, 'give me the same precautions you take, because if Annie is sick and wants me, I'll go to her if it's smallpox she has.'

"'No you won't,' says he, 'for I'll not permit it!'

"'I will,' says I.

"'You won't,' says he, obstinate as a mule.

"Then I began to cry and that settled it.

"You'd never believe it of your frivolous little sister, would you, Jane, but I stayed right there and regularly nursed little Annie. Sammy said afterwards he didn't think he could have pulled her through if it hadn't been for me. He says I'm missing my vocation and really ought to be a nurse.

"I don't agree with him, about saving Annie, I mean. It was he did it, he never left her until the crisis had passed but just fought for her life with might and main. I'll never forget that night we spent at her bedside. Twice I thought she'd go in spite of all our efforts, but his kind blue eyes would look up to me and smile through his spectacles and give me courage to hold on a while longer. It was that night I discovered how great he was, how strong, how dependable. I almost cried when I thought of all the times I had made fun of him because he had queer blue eyes and red hair, and was short and fat. I tell you what, Janey, looks don't cut any ice with me now. They don't amount to shucks when the man inside is as splendid and dear as my Sammy."

Jane gave a gasp and stared in

bewildered amazement. "Sammy!" she exclaimed helplessly.

"Sammy, of course," replied Elaine indignantly. "You don't suppose there's another man in the world that I'd waste so much breath on except my Sammy, do you? Samuel Saxon, M. D., and two or three other alphabets all strung out in a row to denote different degrees bestowed upon him by grateful universities, and who has asked yours truly to be Mrs. M. D. For heaven's sake, Jane, why do you look at me like that? Who on earth do you suppose I was engaged to, if not Sammy?"

"Well, Elaine, your letter—you never mentioned—I—I thought——"

"Good gracious, do you mean to say I didn't mention Sammy in the letter I wrote you yesterday?"

"You didn't mention anyone but

Roger," said Jane desperately. "And so I thought——"

"Glory be, Janey," and Elaine sat back upon her heels and stared at her sister. "You don't mean to say you thought it was Roger?" Jane nodded. Elaine rocked herself back and forth and peal after peal of laughter rang through the room.

"So that explains it," she cried, fairly gasping for breath.

"Explains what?" asked Jane, weakly.

"Why that patient, resigned, will-be-a-martyr-if-I-die-for-it look which your face has worn ever since we landed here this morning. Think of it, Roger, you and me, isn't it just too funny for anything!"

"But your letter, Elaine. I don't remember the exact words, but the impression it gave me was that you were engaged and were afraid I

wouldn't like it, and so you and Roger together were coming to secure my consent and blessing."

"That's the idea I wanted to convey, Janey. Only, I meant I was engaged to Sammy and as you'd never seen him I was afraid you mightn't like it. Roger is Sammy's best friend and so could tell you how splendid he is and what a lucky girl I am in case you did object. As Roger was coming to see you anyway, I made up my mind to come too and have him help me out. See?"

"Yes, dear, I see now."

"I'm awfully sorry, Jane, if my letter misled you and gave you a bad hour or two this morning," went on Elaine contritely. "You know the dear nuns never could (and they tried hard enough goodness knows) teach me to write a decently coherent letter. They always said you knew

less about what I was talking of at the end of the letter than at the beginning. But tell me, Janey, now you know it is Sammy, not Roger, what are you going to say to me?"

"Well, dear, after listening to you for this half hour past and since Roger is willing to vouch for him, I can only say I hope you will both be very happy and the sooner you bring him down for my inspection the better I shall like it."

"Oh! you dear, you dear," with another hug. "I'll go and write him this very minute. And I say, Janey, Roger here wants to tell you something and is almost afraid to do it. I've told him to go right ahead and if you don't behave yourself and treat him nicely, I'll—well, I don't know what I'll do to you. I'll have to think it over and consult with Sammy before I can find any punishment bad

enough for you. And now I'm off to tell Sammy all about it and ask him how he'd like to see me handed over to Roger in the very unceremonious manner in which my big sister was performing the operation. Roger, indeed! Roger isn't in it with my Sammy, not for a single minute. Well, bless you, my children, bless you. Don't forget the luncheon bell will ring in just an hour and a half, Janey. Try to have your mind made up by that time. Pretty short notice, I know, seeing you've had only a year to think the matter over. Me and Roger! Oh! Sammy, Sammy, what will you say to that." And Elaine danced lightly from the room.

Even when she knew Roger had been standing beside her for a full minute, Jane did not raise her head. Roger looked down upon the soft brown waves and smoothly braided

coronet, as, with elbow on the arm of her chair and chin resting on her hand, she carefully studied the pattern in the carpet.

"So you thought I was going to marry Elaine, did you, Jane?" his deep voice asked, slowly.

Jane merely nodded.

"I thought you knew, dear, there was only one woman in all the world for me. There never has been any other, there never can be." No answer at all this time. Then very gently:

"May I tell you her name, Jane?"

Another nod of the bowed head.

Roger's strong hand placed something on her knee. The eyes that had been studying the carpet, moved until they rested upon the object lying on her lap. It was a jagged bit of slate with a stub of a pencil and a very much soiled bit of string.

Looking up at her from the slate were the two words, "deer Jane."

Her fingers closed quickly around the scrap of pencil, and beneath "deer Jane," she traced one little word of three letters.

Then, raising her face, she looked into Roger's eyes, and though no word was spoken, Roger was satisfied.